THE INNOCENCY OF ERROR *Asserted* and *Vindicated.*

IN A

LETTER to----

The THIRD EDITION, *very much corrected and improved by the* AUTHOR.

If there be any who call themselves Protestants, *who affect a* Dominion *over the* Minds *and* Consciences *of Men,—who would debar Men of the* use *of* their own Understandings,—*who will not allow Men to think* honestly, *that do not think* just as *they themselves do, and would be for* persecuting *Men for* Conscience *sake; all I can say of such Persons, is, That they seem* not to know what Spirit they are of, *and are so far* Popish *in the* Protestant *Profession.*

Dr. Sydal's Serm. at Tunbridge, *Aug.* 14. 1715. p. 22.

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The PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION.

THE Innocency of Error *had not long been published, before* Remarks *upon it came out, wrote in a very* angry *manner: Some notice was taken of these in a* Preface *to the Second Edition. The same Author, and in the same manner, wrote a Defence of his Remarks; and since that Time, others have likewise animadverted upon this little Treatise, who laying hold of some incidental Passages or Inaccuracies, would seem to have confuted the Book it self.*

The great end I proposed in writing it, was to shew how innocent a thing it is to be mistaken in any matter, where industry and honesty and diligence had been applied to find out truth: and that God would never punish a man for his errors, if he had been sincere in his searches after the divine will. This point I have not seen confuted: nay, I think that every one of the Gentlemen who have been at the pains of endeavouring to refute this tract, have expressly, or by necessary consequence owned it, how willing soever they may at the same time seem to be to deny it.

I had no other views in writing this Treatise at first, nor have I now in correcting the inaccuracies of the former Editions, but to follow truth in what I judge to be a matter of importance. From my first beginning to think, I have always deemed it not only an injury to persons, but an enmity to truth, to affix odious names and characters to such as honestly pursue truth, if they happen to mistake: and I have never yet been able to perceive any harm or mischief to Society, from a liberty of enquiring, or of publishing Sentiments which are of consequence to mankind.

When therefore it is ſuggeſted, as it has been, that I ſhould in ſome other times *have met with publick diſgrace and diſcountenance, and even cenſures on account of this Treatiſe,---I cannot forbear asking, whether it would have been on account of the* principles *in it from which I have argued, or on account of the* conſequences, *or on account of ſome* incidental Inaccuracies. *The firſt, every one that has wrote againſt me, has granted: The ſecond, not any one can deny: and as to the third, I ſhall always be ready to plead for my excuſe,*

Homo ſum: humani a me nil alienum puto.

I ſhould ask too, what were thoſe Times *? Were they the times of darkneſs and ignorance? Or were they times of tyranny, and oppreſſion, and cruelty? Were they times when truth might dare to appear; or when it could rear up its dejected face, and be heard in the midſt of Antichriſtian violence?*

But be thoſe times what they will, I own that I rejoice, and every man of reaſon will rejoice with me, that the times we live in, are times when private judgment is allowed; when men may ſearch after truth free from perſonal dangers; when truth and not the authority of men is made the teſt of opinions; and when the greateſt men in power publickly diſown all intention, and think it a diſgrace to be charged with a deſign to put a ſtop to true Liberty.

I have but one thing further to add, that in this edition I have taken the liberty to correct, not only what I had obſerved to have miſled ſome into notions which I never deſigned, but likewiſe many paſſages which have not, that I know of, been found fault with by others. I have added, altered, omitted, as I thought proper, very many places, and now ſubmit it to the judgment of every Reader that loves truth.

THE

THE INNOCENCY OF ERROR *Aſſerted* and *Vindicated.*

SIR,

YOU expreſs'd the other day a great deal of concern, not without ſome mixture of indignation, that I ſhould aſſert and vindicate a poſition, which you thought monſtrous and deteſtable, viz. *That no Hereſy is ſo deſtructive of Religion as a Wicked Life; No Schiſm ſo damnable as a Courſe of Sin.* I then urg'd ſome arguments to you, which you own'd contain'd in them a ſhew at leaſt of reaſon, and an air of probability: But yet you were apprehenſive, that I might have uſed ſome art or diſguiſe in my words, which then you could not ſee through ſo clearly; and therefore you deſired me to lay my reaſons

 together,

together, and give you an opportunity of weighing them diſtinctly by your ſelf. I here ſend them to you; expecting only and deſiring a ſincere love of truth, and a readineſs to embrace her, however negligently or inartificially dreſs'd up; aſſuring you from one

Prov. iii. 15. who knew the worth of *Truth* and *Wiſdom*, that *ſhe is more precious than rubies, and all the things that thou canſt deſire are not to be compared to her.*

To evince the truth of the aſſertion, firſt in general, let the words be only conſider'd, and the thing will be evident. Religion conſiſts in an habitual diſpoſition of the mind to perform our duties from a belief in God, and a deſire to make our ſelves acceptable to him. Now 'tis plain, that a courſe of ſin is directly contrary to ſuch a temper; nay, 'tis a contradiction, to pretend to a diſpoſiton of mind to pleaſe God, and yet to act generally ſo as will diſpleaſe him, *i. e.* to lead a wicked Life, or to live in a courſe of ſin. Now if *Hereſy* or *Schiſm* be not a contradiction to an habitual diſpoſition of mind to pleaſe God, then I had good ground to aſſert and vindicate the poſition before laid down. By *Hereſy*, is meant uſually, *An Error in Fundamentals.* Put the caſe now of any Hereſy, *Arianiſm* for inſtance, which ſome pretend is reviving, or *Socinianiſm*, or any other that you pleaſe. 'Tis very poſſible for men to be fully perſwaded of the truth of any one of thoſe opinions, (tho' it be deemed *Heretical*) conſiſtent with a hearty deſire to perform their duties, and to pleaſe God. For where, I pray, is the inconſiſtency? They *believe* in God, and do their duties from a ſenſe of him, and a deſire to make themſelves acceptable to him;

you

you your ſelf cannot deny but that they who do thus are more moral men than thoſe who live in a *courſe of ſin.* They think themſelves oblig'd to act to the beſt of their knowledge, according to the rules which God has laid down; which, if one may judge by the ſinners practice, he doth not: They with diligence and induſtry ſearch and endeavour to find out the will of God, and ſteadily keep all thoſe laws which they underſtand the purport of; which a wicked liver never ſtrives to do.

This you think may be allowed. *But the* Arian *or* Socinian *pays not the honour, or the worſhip, which God has preſcribed And ſince no religion can be acceptable which is contrary to the will of God, they that are guilty of ſuch crimes ſhall ſuffer.*

You know my opinion ſo well on theſe points, that I need not tell you, I neither vindicate nor approve of the one or the other. But yet, ſuppoſing that the *Arian*, or *Socinian*, does not pay the worſhip which is by God commanded, yet each of them obſerves the Will of God to the beſt of his knowledge: whereas the ſinner does not do this. The reputed Heretick gives not ſo compleat a worſhip as is ſuppoſed to be preſcribed; but then he fails through mere ignorance, in a point which is attended with ſuch difficulties as are to him inſuperable: whereas the Sinner fails in plain duties, and acts contrary to his knowledge. And ſo much at leaſt as it is better to pay all that one knows, or can learn, to be due to a creditor, than to refuſe what one knows to be due, ſo much is that which is called hereſy, better than ſin.

The ſame anſwer will juſtify the other part of the aſſertion of *Schiſm.*

Thus much may ſuffice in general as to the aſſertion: But becauſe I would willingly go to the bottom of this queſtion, and treat it with as much care as I can; I'll endeavour to root up the foundation of your prejudices, by repreſenting to you the *Innocency of Error.*

Error is the aſſent of the mind to a propoſition as true, which is not ſo. If this extends no farther than the mind, 'tis what I call *ſimple error.* If a man proceeds upon this falſe bottom to regulate his practice, ſuch error is then called a practical error. How far errors fall under the cognizance of man, or of a much higher tribunal, that of God, will appear from the enſuing diſcourſe. In order to which I ſhall endeavour to ſhew beyond diſpute, that no errors, if involuntary, are or can be puniſhable.

Firſt, In all perceptions the mind is wholly *paſſive*; and the perceptions of things being in numberleſs inſtances quite different from what things are really in themſelves, unleſs we are capable of bringing together and comparing a great many intermediate idea's to rectify theſe miſtakes, we muſt *neceſſarily* fall into abundance of *errors.* Try to perſwade a countryman that the Sun is a great many times bigger than the Earth, or that it is a great many thouſand miles diſtant from us, and he'll think you attempt only to impoſe upon him, and endeavour to perſwade him out of his ſenſes. In theſe and ten thouſand ſuch like caſes, men are as *neceſſarily* under errors, as they are *neceſſary* in their perceptions, and they cannot help continuing in this ſort of miſtakes, for want of proper

per means to rectify them; and therefore in theſe caſes they are no more to blame for not removing them, than a ſtone is to blame for moving when it is impell'd.

Secondly, Error always conſiſting in a miſtake of the judgment, it muſt be in its own nature involuntary: and if involuntary error be puniſhable, then where-ever there is error there is guilt, and conſequently *all men* muſt be guilty before God on that account. For where is the man that doth not entertain ſome errors, either concerning things which really do exiſt, or in deductions which he draws from them? Who is there that is ſo well vers'd in nature, as to be maſter of all her mazes, and certain that he *knows*, I ſay, *knows* all her ſecrets? Or who is there that ever repented or ask'd God's pardon for miſtakes of this nature? And yet if errors be criminal, 'tis certain that all crimes unrepented of are damnable.

But 'tis allowed that a man may be miſtaken in many things of this nature, without any crime or fault. But where God has concerned himſelf in the diſcovery of any thing, there it is thought to be criminal to err, or to be ignorant.

This, though it may ſeem to carry a profound reſpect for the Revelation of God, yet it is plainly inſufficient for the purpoſe for which it is brought. For, 1ſt, Is any man obliged to *know*, or underſtand in the meaning which God intended, *every* thing that is revealed? Is any man obliged to have a diſtinct knowledge of every paſſage of the Scriptures, which unleſs he can attain to, he muſt neceſſarily be damned? Let him that thinks ſo, ſet about the explica-

tion

tion of the *Apocalypſe*, or the old Prophets, and try if he is capable himſelf of doing what he thinks is required of others under pain of damnation. 2dly, 'Tis impoſſible not to believe what God has thought fit to reveal, ſuppoſing one knows that God has revealed it. But ſurely a man that has ſufficient ground to believe that God has declared his mind, yet may not have a clear and diſtinct underſtanding of every thing contained in the Revelation. Suppoſe a man ſhould not underſtand who, or what, is meant by the *White Horſe* in the *Revelations*, or what is the meaning of *being baptized for the Dead*, or of many other ſuch like difficult paſſages; yet whilſt he owns that God is the author of theſe paſſages, and is ready to believe them in the beſt manner he can get an underſtanding of them, where can be his crime? Why, is it not rational to conclude, that if God had deſigned upon pain of damnation that every one ſhould have determinate and adequate idea's belonging to thoſe ſounds, he would have ſo expreſs'd himſelf as that no one ſhould miſtake his meaning? Therefore, 3dly, If it is always criminal to err in the meaning of a paſſage of Scripture, the crime will not reſt where we are apt to fix it, but will aſcend to a place where we dare not think of guilt, even to God himſelf, who has delivered his will in terms that are ſo hard to be underſtood. 4thly, The diſtinction here made uſe of between *Errors in Things revealed*, and *Errors in other Matters*, proves directly, that *Error* as *Error* is not *Criminal*. For 'tis as much an error to believe heat in the fire, as to miſtake any *Theological Truth*. But I proceed,

Thirdly,

Thirdly, If *Involuntary Error* be puniſhable by God; then 'tis the greateſt cruelty, injuſtice and tyranny imaginable in him, to make ſuch creatures as cannot but err in many caſes, and yet to puniſh them for erring. Our knowledge is but of very narrow extent, and confined to a very few things; the reſt muſt be reſolved into opinion; and as there are innumerable degrees of aſſent, from aſſurance and confidence, down to diſtruſt and diſbelief, there may be as many poſſibilities of errors. As this then is the make and frame of our conſtitutions, it would be cruel and unjuſt in God to puniſh us for what we cannot help; or to treat us as breakers of his laws, when we only want *Light*, which the *Father* of *Light* alone can give.

Fourthly, If *Involuntary Errors* are puniſhable by God, 'tis not a few that are called or repreſented as *Hereticks*; nor a few *Diſſenters* in a nation, (tho' 'tis only theſe *more openly* are ſtruck at by the abettors of ſuch unchriſtian tenets) no, nor Ten thouſand times ten thouſand, that muſt periſh everlaſtingly; but the flames of hell will reach to almoſt, if not quite, to all the Chriſtian world. Let us look into the ſeveral communities of Chriſtians, and by an impartial View of their *profeſſed* tenets, ſee how by the lump whole nations muſt be damn'd, if mere *Errors* are damnable. The *Greek* Church denies the *Proceſſion of the Holy Ghoſt* from the *Son*; the *Melchites* do the ſame; ſo do the *Georgians* and *Muſcovites*: The *Neſtorians* maintain the hereſy of *Neſtorius*, averring *two Perſons* as well as two natures in our Saviour: The Chriſtians of St. *Thomas* do the ſame: The *Jacobites* are *Eutychians*: The *Egyptians* think it their duty to *circumciſe*, and to give the

the ſacrament of the Lord's ſupper to Infants: The *Abaſſines* circumciſe: The *Armenians* believe as the *Greeks* about the *Proceſſion* of the *Holy Ghoſt*, and receive Infants to the Communion: The *Maronites* do the ſame, and are *Monothelites*, or lately were ſo, till they reconciled themſelves to the *Romiſh* Church, which I doubt has but little leſſened their errors: The *Roman Catholicks* are almoſt as full of errors as they have practices; their *Idolatry* and *Superſtitions* are as evident as their profeſſion of *Tranſubſtantiation*, and all their *Theology* is a medly of *Nonſence* and *Abſurdity*. If we look upon Proteſtantiſm, we cannot but own all the *Diſſenters* from the *Church* of *England* to be erroneous: Thoſe of *Geneva*, *France* and *Holland* think epiſcopacy unneceſſary, and have varied from that form of government which Chriſt and his Apoſtles inſtituted: *Scotland* is in the ſame unhappy condition: The *Lutherans conſubſtantiate*: In a Word, All are in Error, but *our Happy Church*; thrice Happy, if we can but keep in the ſame ſtate we are in! Heaven will be repleniſhed with us alone; and the compliment formerly paid by the Pope to our Nation, that *Angli* are *quaſi Angeli*, will be proper only when applied to the members of our communion. I need not ſpeak a word about the *Heathens*, or the *Mahometans*, which make up (if we believe Mr. *Breerwood*'s computation) twenty five parts of thirty of the World. Of the remaining Five, all but our little *Duſt upon the Balance*, our *Drop in the Sea*, are to go into everlaſting puniſhment, *into a Place where the Fire is not quenched, and the Worm never dies.* In ſhort, Heaven is made only for a *Part* of *England*, and a much leſs part too than is perhaps imagined. For the men who would be in charity with all

other

other Chriſtians, who think they all have a right to judge for themſelves, and that no man hath a dominion over the conſcience of another; that all men have a right to toleration as much as they have to property, theſe (unhappy men, worthy of better fate!) Theſe bad churchmen muſt go —— their enemies will tell them whither.

You will be ready to evade the Force of this Argument, by retorting it in ſome ſuch manner as this:---That by parity of reaſon it may be ſaid, that ſin therefore is not damnable, becauſe all mankind are ſinners. For where is the difference in theſe arguments----If damnation be the conſequence of ſin, it will follow, that all mankind being ſinners, all mankind muſt be damned: and, damnation being put as the conſequence of error, all mankind being under errors, all mankind muſt be damned. Where is the difference, you'll perhaps aſk, of theſe arguments, that the one is a good, the other is a bad one? But,

To this the anſwer is ſo eaſie, that I ſhall not inſiſt on it farther, than to obſerve, that all ſin is voluntary, and unrepented of is damnable; but the error here ſpoken of is involuntary, and cannot be repented of, becauſe taken to be truth. Therefore we ſee all the world dies in errors of ſome ſort or other, never aſking pardon of or for them. But ſin is always *repented* of by every ſober good chriſtian, whether he be a *Grecian*, *Roman*-catholick, or *Proteſtants*: which ſhews that all the world agrees in a great and material difference in the caſes. But this makes

A fifth argument, why involuntary error cannot be puniſhable, becauſe we cannot repent of ſuch error, ſince we believe it to be true. I do not ſay, a man cannot *retract* an error, when he

diſcovers it to be ſuch, which is ſome ſort of repentance, if you think fit to call it ſo; but, a man can have no ſting of conſcience, no remorſe, no ſelf-condemning notions, for being under a miſtake. Error being a miſtake of the judgment, it muſt direct and guide our actions as much as truth it ſelf. Now the ſway of truth, is, by directing our actions according to our judgment; and if that be miſ-inform'd, or be miſguided, the effect muſt be the ſame as of truth, as flowing from the ſame principle. Now as 'tis a contradiction to be fully perſwaded of any point, and to repent of it at the ſame time, 'twill follow, that becauſe the error is unknown, it therefore cannot be repented of. And who is there in ten thouſand, or in a great many times that number, that doth not die in abundance of errors about one thing or other, which yet he takes to be ſo many real truths? Who is there that ſtrives to make his peace with God, for ſuch things which he has endeavoured to free himſelf from, but yet continues in them, not through any fault of his own? Sin being voluntary, and our own act, we repent of it, and aſk God's pardon for it. But error in judgment, when we do our endeavours ſincerely to attain truth, is not an action: in that we are paſſive, and conſequently 'tis not our own deed, nor imputable to us, more than other things, which we can neither prevent their happening, nor remedy after they have happened. Every man may therefore ſay, what the incomparable Mr. *Chillingworth* ſays, "If men "ſuffer themſelves neither to be betrayed into "their errors, nor kept in them by any ſin of "their will; if they do their beſt endeavours to "free themſelves from all errors, and yet fail of

"it

" it thro' human frailty ; ſo well am I perſwad-
" ed of the goodneſs of God, that if in me a-
" lone ſhould meet a confluence of all ſuch er-
" rors of all the proteſtants of the World that
" were thus qualified, I ſhould not be ſo much
" afraid of them all, as I ſhould be to aſk par-
" don for them. For —— to aſk pardon of ſim-
" ple and purely involuntary errors, is tacitely
" to imply that God is angry with us for them ;
" and that were to impute to him the tyranny of
" requiring brick where he gives no ſtraw, of ex-
" pecting to gather where he ſtrewed not, to reap
" where he ſowed not, of being offended with us,
" for doing what he knows we cannot do. "
Anſwer to the preface, §. 26.

For theſe reaſons it is that I conclude, that involuntary error cannot be puniſhable : and ſuch muſt be reckon'd not only errors that have been critically examin'd by every particular perſon, but ſuch as have been ſearched by the rule of common human prudence and diſcretion. Thoſe muſt not always be reckon'd voluntary which ariſe from the common ſprings of error, (tho' theſe are too often reckon'd ſuch,) *viz.* authority, preconceiv'd *hypotheſes*, or even predominant paſſions themſelves ; much leſs are thoſe to be reckon'd guilty of voluntary errors, who want either abilities or opportunities to ſearch after truth. Such only are voluntary as can be avoided by that care and application of mind which the importance of the ſubject requires : or ſuch as we embrace or continue in through negligence, ſloth, and ſuch-like cauſes.

You will not, I know, admit it for truth, without good proof, that errors ſpringing from the cauſes juſt now mentioned, are not criminal. I ſhall therefore conſider them diſtinctly, and ſee

if there be any ſin or evil in errors ſo occaſion'd; and if there be, in what that ſin conſiſts.

Firſt then, that error is not always criminal, or puniſhable, which ſprings from authority. The bulk of mankind, 'tis certain, have not abilities or time ſufficient to enquire after abſtruſe truths, and therefore muſt either have no notions at all, or muſt take up with the notions of others. Some are guided by, and ſee entirely with the eyes of ſuch whom they judge to be their friends. Others there are, who think nothing true, but what is to be found amongſt the antients, and think it an infallible note, that *Ariſtotle* in philoſophick matters, ſome or other of the fathers in religious ones, have ſaid it. Some reſign their minds to the church blindly, and without examination: others take up with the current opinions, and imagine error could never ſpread it ſelf ſo wide, and captivate ſuch and ſuch great perſons. In ſhort, theſe are all, to their reſpective guides, juſt what *Sancho* was to *Don Quixot*, they are fully perſwaded of enchantments, gyants, and adventures which their maſters dream of; they bring themſelves into frequent difficulties to juſtify them; and then expect no leſs than iſlands or earldoms as the rewards of their follies.

To ſhew you that the errors of ſuch are not always criminal, let it be conſider'd, that authority is allowed to be not only a means of information, but is a ground of perſwaſion too in ſeveral caſes. For inſtance; in aſſenting to a divine revelation, the authority of God is a ſufficient ground of our belief, becauſe no truth is more certain, no maxim is more evident than this, that the God of truth cannot, will not, lye. His authority is grounded on his veracity, and integrity, and abilities; and in depending upon him

him we cannot err. But then in other caſes, where only men are concerned, their authority is proportionable to their veracity and integrity, and powers. If any one therefore depends upon theſe, he may frequently be deceived. And if he be, 'tis plain, that the error is not for want of will to know the truth, but want of power to attain it. The canal through which it was to paſs is ſtopped, and therefore it is impoſſible to get at it. There are numberleſs perſons who cannot read, and theſe muſt neceſſarily depend on others for information in their religion. If theſe are under errors, and their errors are criminal, the crime can fall on thoſe only from whom they receive inſtruction. Prudence and diſcretion will ſometimes oblige us to depend on the authority of others, where poſſibly they, and conſequently we, may be miſtaken. To puniſh us for ſuch errors, would be the ſame as to require us to act imprudently and indiſcreetly; which a God of infinite wiſdom cannot expect from us; nor will he be ſo rigid a taſk-maſter as to require brick without ſtraw from us. Beſides; were all errors criminal which ſpring from authority, 'tis certain that a means of information, and a ground of perſwaſion, would be render'd not only dangerous, but inconſiſtent with prudence and diſcretion. For it would be imprudent to hazard damnation, upon crediting any body; and yet 'tis impoſſible to with-hold aſſent, when there ſeems to us to be greater degrees of probability for what is ſaid, than againſt it. If only ſome errors, which ſpring from this fountain, are criminal, then 'tis plain that the faultineſs of them muſt be cauſed by ſomething elſe beſides authority, *viz.* from negligence or careleſſneſs, or ſome ſuch circumſtance of error.

Secondly:

Secondly: Nor is that error always criminal which proceeds from pre-conceived hypotheſes, or poſitions, which being falſe, are admitted for true. Such pre-conceptions being erroneous, it is in vain to expect any thing from them but errors; and if the hypotheſes are not criminal, that which flows from them directly cannot be ſo. He that ſearches after truth, ought as critically as he can to examine the principles he goes upon, and muſt take great care that every ſtep is fairly deduc'd, or elſe he'll quickly find that 'tis not the light of truth, but an *Ignis fatuus*, which he purſues. But yet how few, if any, are guarded againſt pre-conceptions. 'Tis often nothing but inadvertency, when any one takes up with prepoſſeſſions: but then, as ſure as inadvertency is very conſiſtent with ſincerity, ſo ſure it is that a God of goodneſs and juſtice cannot puniſh them when joined together. Sometimes the prepoſſeſſion is ſo ſtrong, that no arguments will make any impreſſion upon the mind; and 'tis very poſſible for a man to imagine that he ſees a connexion between two propoſitions, when there really is none; as on the contrary, not to perceive it where there is. Ideas which have been long combined together, and which we have conſtantly aſſociated in our Minds, are found to be ſometimes inſeparable by all our care. When this is the caſe, we ought not to deem it obſtinacy, or froward waywardneſs, if we are not able to convince a man of ſome miſtake he labours under; but we ſhould leave it to time, and further care to cure him of his errors. The Inſtances are very numerous of learned men, who never could be convinced of certain miſtakes. The idea of God proves his exiſtence, is a poſition ſo far from true, that nothing ſeems to me a plainer paralogiſm; and yet how many

are there who contend for its evidence, as being one of the ſhorteſt and moſt direct concluſions imaginable? Should an Atheiſt be convinced of the being of a God, from that argument, would any one affirm that he would be liable to puniſhment for his error? Suppoſe any one ſeduced by the ambiguity of the word, *God*, in the ſacred writings, ſhould maintain an abſolute coequality of the perſons of the ever-bleſſed Trinity: this would be, if I miſtake not, direct Tritheiſm: or ſuppoſe any one ſhould aſſert the words *one God*, ſpeaking of the three perſons of the trinity, to ſignify one individual eſſence or ſubſtance under different perſonal characters; this would be the error of *Sabellius*. Suppoſe, I ſay, one early educated in, and ſtrongly prepoſſeſſed in favour of either of theſe notions, ſhould maintain them, or believe them to be true, where would be the diſhoneſty, or inſincerity of this? He may notwithſtanding have a cordial love for God and his Chriſt: He may be ſtrictly religious, and live temperately, ſoberly and godly: and if theſe are the things which alone are required by God in order to a *Chriſtian's* ſalvation, why ſhould we imagine that he will damn us for our notions, when it is ſo often out of our powers whether we will believe them or not? In ſhort, an hypotheſis may be received as true, which may be falſe; or as falſe, which may be true; without any wilfulneſs, inſincerity, or reſolution to maintain it right or wrong. One may not ſee the error for want of abilities, or be ſo bewilder'd in the intricate ways that lead to truth, as after a tireſome ſearch to ſit down with error, and embrace a ſhadow inſtead of a ſubſtance. Theſe and ſuch like involuntary caſes we ſhould not confound with volun-

voluntary practices; or imagine that if the one be criminal, the other muſt imply a ſhare of guilt.

The crime in the preſent caſe, be it more or leſs, is wholly in negligence, or want of that application which ought to have been employed, and not in the error it ſelf which was conſequent upon education, or early prejudice.

Thirdly: In caſes where there is want of abilities to know an error, or want of opportunity, I need not prove that truth is out of our power to come at it, and conſequently that we are neceſſarily under error, and therefore not liable to puniſhment. I'll add,

Fourthly: That even predominant paſſions hindering us in the ſearch after truth, do not always render errors puniſhable. Truth 'tis certain, is often no more in our power than perception is; nor can we help aſſenting to what we think has the beſt, and cleareſt, and moſt proofs. We cannot aſſent to any truth, but ſuch as we judge to be ſo, according to the evidences we have. If any paſſion therefore predominates, and hurries us away before we can reflect, we cannot but err; and then it is our misfortune, it is our frailty, it is our infirmity, and we are unhappy in it; but it is not our fault or crime: we become the objects of goodneſs, not of anger or ſeverity. Here would I recommend to every man a careful examination of his actions; and if he finds them tending to the hurt of others, to ſuſpect ſome latent negligence, or careleſſneſs in himſelf: for paſſions which we can controul will not excuſe us in injurious actions. Reaſon and religion were given us in order to regulate our wills, and to make us happy here, by promoting love and charity, and univerſal benevolence. But if we ſuffer through our own faults, our paſſions to take fire, and break

break in upon theſe duties, we become reſponſible to the great Judge of all our actions.

You will ſay perhaps, that it is needleſs to guard againſt evil actions, ſince they flowing neceſſarily from the judgment, muſt be as innocent as the judgment is.

I readily allow, that all ſuch actions as neceſſarily follow from an involuntary error, muſt be as innocent as the error is. But in general this is not the caſe of human actions. The duties of juſtice and charity to our neighbours, of temperance to our ſelves, and of piety to God, are ſo expreſs and plain, that it is hard not to be convinced of the common obligation which all are under to them. They are ſo evident, that if at any time any man is ſo diſpoſed as to think evil good, and good evil, he cannot but ſuſpect a fault in himſelf and his own mind, juſt as when we are unable to perceive light at noon day, we may juſtly conclude that the organs of ſight are indiſpoſed. Our actions therefore ſhould always be conſidered, and always be guarded carefully; and if they tend any how to barbarity, or injuſtice, or what uſually appears as evil, it will bea good ground for ſuſpicion, and for a more careful examination of ſuch principles as direct them. But to proceed.

You will be apt to aſk here, if any ſort of error can be criminal? Will a man be juſtified before God, who is guilty of hereſy, becauſe, forſooth, he is paſſionate, or becauſe he follows a great many who have gone before him in the ſame track, or becauſe he takes up with whimſical notions which are acknowledged falſhoods? Is not this to make a *chaos* and confuſion amongſt mankind? Is there no difference between erroneous perſons and others? Is there none between ortho-

doxy and hereſy? Is it all one, if a man be an *Arian*, a *Socinian*, a *Macedonian*, or let him have what notions he pleaſes, provided they are involuntary?

I ſhall turn the edge of this popular clamour, (for I cannot allow it the name of an argument) in a few words. As,

Firſt: All voluntary errors (and I have told you what are voluntary) are criminal, becauſe they are contempts of God, who has given us proper means to ſearch after truth. It is the improvement of our ſouls we are as much as we can to mind; and wilfully to refuſe and neglect that, is to act contrary to the purpoſe of God, in veſting us with ſuch faculties. But what a difference is there between this conduct, and our falling into errors through infirmity, or by neceſſity? Let voluntary errors therefore be as criminal as you pleaſe; but then you muſt remember to lay them to the charge of only ſuch as are guilty of them, and you muſt be very ſure who are ſuch; for be aſſured that it is not your bare charge will make them ſo.

Secondly: An heretick will not be juſtified becauſe he is paſſionate, or becauſe he follows a multitude, or has great authorities for his errors, but becauſe his errors are involuntary. He doth his beſt to rid himſelf of that ſlavery which ties down his mind to error, but finds himſelf unable to gain the maſtery. He can ſay as St. *Paul* does, *Rom.* vii. 18. *To will is preſent with me, but how to perform that which is good I know not.* Whereever it can be ſhewn that hereſy or ſchiſm is a known voluntary act, there to be ſure it is criminal, and no doubt that God juſtly may and will take cognizance of it. But when it is involuntary, and ariſes from a man's miſtaking the truth,

ſchiſm

ſchiſm or hereſy is ſo far from being damnable, that I cannot but think it is highly commendable, becauſe it evidences honeſty, ſincerity, love of God, and of truth, and regards not the praiſe of men. Such men will certainly meet with favour at the laſt day from a God of goodneſs, how great ſoever their errors may be, becauſe they embraced them, and purſued them, as believing them to be his will, and uſed their beſt care to find out the truth. 'Tis not the mere following multitudes, that excuſes Men; but it is the doing their beſt to know the will of God, which takes off the imputation of ſin and guilt. Therefore,

Thirdly, A man may be branded with the ignominious characters of an *Arian*, *Sabellian*, or what you pleaſe; but if he be honeſt and ſincere, and hath done his beſt to rid himſelf of thoſe notions, and yet he cannot but think them true, *i. e.* agreeable to revelation and reaſon, I can ſee no reaſon but that one heaven may receive him, as well as it may the moſt orthodox. But this will ſtill appear more clear, if we conſider, that

All perſons under the misfortune of error are either,

Firſt, Such as err involuntarily in purely ſpeculative matters. Or,

Secondly, Such whoſe involuntary errors have no neceſſary connexion with practice, but yet they may accidentally have an influence upon it. Or,

Thirdly, Such whoſe involuntary errors have a neceſſary connexion with practice, but they do not ſee it. Or,

Laſtly, Such as err voluntarily, and practice according to their errors.

Firſt, Such as err in purely ſpeculative matters, (I ſpeak of perſons who have endeavoured to know the truth, but cannot attain unto it) ſuch, I ſay, are as free from crime or fault, as it is poſſible for ſuch as are orthodox in thoſe points to be. For he that with ſincerity ſearches after truth, is under a neceſſity of aſſenting to ſuch propoſitions as ſeem to him to have the greateſt degree of probability on their ſides. 'Tis out of our powers not to think that trueſt, for which the arguments appear to us to be ſtrongeſt; and it is our duties to let evidence, or the greateſt degree of probability prevail, and to give a ready ear to that. In the various ſpeculations concerning the Unity of the Trinity, it is granted by all that they are in the dark, as to many particulars: and that in thoſe caſes where God has not revealed his mind, it is ridiculous and abſurd for man to preſume poſitively to determine. 'Tis plain too, that very honeſt, and very ſincere, and very pious men have erred, or are ſuſpected to have erred, in their notions upon this point; from whence it is plain that revelation has not very clearly and diſtinctly laid down the things which have been ſo much canvaſs'd. Now if it be a good principle, (and what proteſtant is there that ever called it in queſtion?) that the Scriptures are clear in all fundamental points; then it follows, that if this be not clearly laid down, it cannot be a fundamental point how the Three are One. The errors which ariſe about that, either ariſe from want of ſufficient revelation, which men endeavour to ſupply by, or reconcile to reaſon, that other light which God has kindled in every man's breaſt in order to enlighten his ways, or elſe from ſome violent prejudice or other, whieh good men are not able to ſurmount. Now he that ſtudies ſincerely this or

any

any other point, with deſign to honour his great Creator, by ſearching and examining what he has revealed, by endeavouring to find out what he has diſcovered; in a word, he that doth his beſt to know his maſter's will, and to find out his meaning, and yet errs; to dare to ſay that ſuch a man ſins, and ſhall be puniſhed for it hereafter, is little leſs than blaſphemy. For it is a conſequential denial of God's goodneſs and juſtice, to affirm him reſolved to puniſh us for involuntary errors, or for not knowing what we cannot with all our pains and induſtry attain the knowledge of. "To "ſay, that when a place of Scripture (ſays the in- "comparable Mr. *Chillingworth*, c. 2. §. 104.) "by reaſon of ambiguous terms, lies indifferent "between divers ſenſes, whereof one is true, "and the other is falſe; that God obliges men "under the pain of damnation not to miſtake "through error and human frailty; is to make "God a tyrant, and to ſay, that he requires us "certainly to attain that end, for the attaining "whereof we have no certain means; which is "to ſay, that, like *Pharaoh*, he *gives no ſtraw "and requires brick*, that he *reaps where he ſows not*, "that he *gathers where he ſtrews not*, that he will "not be pleaſed with our utmoſt endeavours to "pleaſe him, without full, and exact, and never- "failing performance; that his will is, we ſhould "do what he knows we cannot do; that he will "not accept of us according to that which we "have, but requireth of us what we have not; "which whether it conſiſteth with his goodneſs, "with his wiſdom, or with his word, I leave it to "honeſt men to judge". I cannot forbear tranſcribing from him the following inſtance, which is ſo exactly parallel to the matter in hand: "If I "ſhould ſend a ſervant to *Paris*, or *Rome*, or *Jeruſa-*

"*lem*,

" *lem*, and he uſing his utmoſt diligence not to " miſtake his way, yet notwithſtanding, meeting " often with ſuch places where the road is divided " into ſeveral ways, whereof one is as likely to " be true, and as likely to be falſe, as any other, " ſhould at length miſtake, and go out of the " way : would not any man ſay, that I were an " impotent, fooliſh, and unjuſt maſter, if I ſhould " be offended with him for doing ſo? and ſhall " we not tremble to impute that to God, which " we ſhould take in foul ſcorn, if it were imputed " to our ſelves? Certainly, I, for my part, fear " I ſhould not love God, if I ſhould think ſo " ſtrangely of him ".

For any one therefore to imagine it zeal for God to perſecute men for errors in ſpeculation, which we are not able to correct, what is it but to betray an ignorance of God and of his attributes? It is calling God a tyrant, to ſay that he will puniſh them; and it is making men the devil's agents, for them to puniſh them; it is pride, malice, and uncharitableneſs; it is promoting the power and deſigns of Satan, and encouraging that ſcandalous and diabolical vice hypocriſy; it is ſuppreſſing truth it ſelf; it is putting a ſtop to induſtry; in a word, it is neither *entring one's ſelf, nor letting others*, (as much as we can help it) *enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

When therefore I ſee a man of pride and haughtineſs, of inſolence, art and cunning, one that never ſpeaks his own real ſentiments, but only what may make an auditory think him entirely in theirs; one that recommends concord and unanimity, and in order thereto endeavours to perſuade others to leave off all hard words, yet inſtantly riſes up and uſes them himſelf; one that is fearful leſt another ſhould bear away the prize of elocution, or outſtrip

ſtrip him in honours, intereſt, or favour; one that is aiming to be head of a party, and throwing out ill-names, inſinuations and reproaches liberally upon an adverſary, for the very things he has been guilty of himſelf; one that acts always a double part, and is ſo ſcrupulouſly zealous for the glory of God, and the reſpect to be paid to the ſacred pages, as to imagine a ſcripture ſtory prophaned if put upon a ſign; in ſhort, when I ſee a man ambitious, and reſolv'd to ſacrifice all to pleaſe the party in which he is engaged: ſure I am, that one of this, or the like temper will ſhew a mighty zeal againſt any error, how innocent ſoever in it ſelf, and will be ready to condemn any one that oppoſes him as an *Heretick*, and will be for all the arbitrary proceedings and tyrannical proſecutions that he can promote. Such an haranguer will be obſtinate in his opinion, poſitive and confident in what he aſſerts, and nothing, no not the whole *Bench of Biſhops* ſhould they be ready to deliver an opinion contrary to his, would be able to alter the leaſt tittle of his haughty ſpirit. Were not this ſpirit of *Popery* too-too rife among *Proteſtants*, I had not digreſſed, but had ſooner proceeded to the *Second* ſort of perſons under error, *viz.* Such whoſe errors have no neceſſary connexion with their practice, but yet may through accident have an influence upon it. As the former ſort of erroneous Perſons were innocent and free from guilt, becauſe their error was involuntary, ſo are theſe, when the reaſon is the ſame. The guilt of error is always to be meaſur'd by the diſpoſition of him that is under it. If therefore it be not the reſult of negligence or careleſſneſs, but was taken up after mature deliberation, I ſee not how it can expoſe any one to puniſhment from God. Thus, for inſtance, ſhould a man miſtake the meaning

of

of the word Ὁμοούσιος, of *One Subſtance*, when it is applied to the Son, and think it means *One Individual Subſtance* with the Father, and notwithſtanding all he can do in examining and comparing texts of ſcripture, ſhould yet continue fixed in that, as the only means of underſtanding how the *Father* and *Son* are *One*; He would, were he to explain himſelf, be found guilty of the error of either *Tritheiſm* or *Socinianiſm*: but yet he would be free from guilt before God under theſe circumſtances. Or, ſuppoſe that one ſhould think the *Creed*, commonly call'd of *Athanaſius*, to be ſo agreeable to the tenor of ſcripture, that it would be inconſiſtent with the true intereſt of the chriſtian religion to have it expung'd the book of Common-prayer. Theſe and abundant more ſuch errors have certainly no neceſſary connexion with practice. But notwithſtanding that, a man may be influenced by them in ſuch a manner as to render himſelf juſtly puniſhable by man. Suppoſe, *e. g.* that one in theſe circumſtances were to become turbulent to his neighbours, and injurous to them, no doubt the civil magiſtrate would have a right to puniſh him, notwithſtanding the erroneous perſon might think it a *throwing up the eſſentials of faith, and the uniformity of worſhip*, or a putting both them that differ from him, *and himſelf too into a gulph of perdition*, to ſuffer others to proceed in their ways. The civil magiſtrate is not to direct himſelf by the conſcience of others, but is to take care of the peace of ſociety, the diſturbance of which is, and ought to be, criminal before him. But then when theſe very actions come under the cognizance of God, at the great day of judgment, they will be conſidered in another manner; how far they were the effects of careleſſneſs, of negligence, or ſloth: and if the error it ſelf was at firſt embraced

braced as a real truth, and the obſtacles which hindred the man from perceiving the truth, were ſuch as he could not ſurmount, after his beſt endeavours to know the truth, neither the error, nor its conſequence, under theſe circumſtances, will be puniſhed by our equitable and righteous Judge.

And here I think we may lay down this as a rule, by which we may judge of the importance of any error. All ſuch things may a man err in ſafely, of which he may ſafely be ignorant: for if his ſalvation is not at ſtake by reaſon of his neſcience, ſuppoſing he maſters the truth he aims at, it is ſuperfluous knowledge in reſpect of ſalvation; and therefore if he miſtakes it, he miſtakes about ſomething which has no relation to his ſalvation.

But you'll be apt perhaps to ſay, that evil thoughts are reckoned by our Saviour amongſt *the things which defile a man*, Mat. xv. 19, 20. that they will certainly be puniſhed, being certainly ſinful: and that errors are evil thoughts which injure the ſoul, which exclude the light of truth, and conſequently defile and pollute the ſoul, and therefore muſt render a man obnoxious to puniſhment.

I need not ſtay to tell you, that evil thoughts do not ſignify erroneous ones, but ſuch as, if indulged and proſecuted, will produce evil actions. Certain it is, that firſt motions are not in our powers; and God could not be ſaid to act with juſtice, much leſs with equity or mercy, ſhould he puniſh what is not in our powers to prevent. But if theſe firſt motions (which I ſuppoſe to be of evil thoughts) be indulg'd, if we take a pleaſure in them, it is evident then that we declare our approbation of them, and conſequently we make them our own, and by that means the man is defiled, and will be puniſhed for it.

Secondly, A man may be miſtaken in numberleſs inſtances, which if he proſecutes, yet his errors will not produce any evil actions: but then a man cannot entertain an evil thought, but if he proſecutes that, it will produce wicked acts; which plainly ſhews a great Difference betwixt evil and erroneous thoughts.

To ſtrengthen this, let me add an obſervation or two, *viz.* 1ſt, That no-where in all the ſcriptures do the apoſtles, or our bleſſed Saviour, ever aſſert, that men ſhall be puniſhed for involuntary errors, 2dly, Every-where, when occaſion is taken to treat of the proceedings at the day of judgment, we find that our actions, and they only, are the ſubjects of enquiry. In that we have *DONE Good* or *Evil*, the *WORKERS* of *Iniquity* are to be *rewarded* or *puniſhed*. Vid. Mat. vii. 21, 23, *c.* xiii. 41. *c.* xvi. 27. *c.* xxv. 31,----46. Luke xiii. 26. John v. 29. Rom. ii. 6, 7, 10, *&c.* From theſe and other paſſages of the ſame import, I conclude, that either the Judge of mankind, has not truly told us the ſubjects of his enquiry at the laſt day, which would be blaſphemy to ſay; or elſe involuntary errors will not be puniſhed. I proceed to the

Third ſort of erroneous perſons, *viz.* ſuch whoſe errors have a neceſſary connexion with Practice, but yet the connexion is not by them ſeen. However plain and evident the conſequences of them are to others, yet whilſt they are denied and avoided as ſo much poiſon by them who embrace the error, ſuch miſtake cannot but be very innonocent. There is not a plainer connexion between any principle and its conſequences, than there is between a fix'd belief of a fatality, and the reaſonableneſs of running up to a loaded cannon's mouth;

mouth; or between a firm perſwaſion of God's having elected, or reprobated, Men before they have done either good or evil, and the gratification of their inclinations; and yet numbers that ſteadily believe the one, will deteſt and abhor the other. It ſeems very clear that if a man be abſolutely predeſtinated to happineſs, and cannot fall from Grace, nothing ſhould hinder him from indulging his Appetites, or from enjoying all the pleaſures of this life, ſince he cannot on any account fail of the next. Or in another inſtance, they that maintain good works not to be neceſſary to ſalvation, but reſolve all into faith, why ſhould not they proſecute their pleaſures, and give the looſe to their appetites? Yet notwithſtanding the ſeemingly evident connexion, there are thoſe who would lay down their lives rather than admit the concluſion. The reaſon of this conduct ſeems to be this: they admit an error as an indiſputable truth; or, which amounts to the ſame in this caſe, they are deceived by an ambiguous expreſſion of ſcripture. The principle it ſelf they take up with is true, when rightly underſtood; and finding it in ſcripture, they are poſitive that no demonſtration is ſtronger than this is,---God hath ſaid it, therefore 'tis true. But running away with the words, they leave the meaning behind them, and admit verbal principles (if I may call them ſo) inſtead of ideal ones. They therefore will deny a conſequence which they find to be inconſiſtent with all the other notions of religion which they entertain. They have the good fortune to be kept in their reſpective duties by other reaſons, which are clear and plain, and poſitive; and ſeeing the conſequences deduced from their erroneous principles ſtare them ſo boldly in their Faces, they abominate them: not becauſe

they really do not follow, but becauſe they are evidently diſagreeable to other notions which they have equally imbib'd. Had all men judgment to diſcern error from truth, no one would continue under error. The firmneſs with which this ſort of Men embrace the notions which they think are contained in the word of God, plainly ſhews them lovers of God, and of his Chriſt: It ſhews them honeſt, and very unwilling that man ſhould extort from them any ſacred truth. They are ready to ſacrifice their lives to man, in proof, that with ſincerity they believe what God, they think, has revealed. They do their beſt to know his will, and to act according to it; and therefore errors in ſuch perſons ſignify no more than no errors. Suppoſing they had had the good fortune to believe right, they would have been but the ſame good Men; their practices had been the ſame; and ſince 'tis our works that will be rewarded or puniſhed, they will certainly have their rewards, who continue good, notwithſtanding principles which have a neceſſary connexion with evil. Sure it is, that the errors of ſuch People ſpring not from choice or will, but from the force of what they think ſcripture and reaſon. And if, as Mr. *Chillingworth* incomparably argues, "By "reaſon of the ſeeming conflict which is often-"times between ſcripture, reaſon, and authority "on the one ſide, and ſcripture, reaſon, and au-"thority on the other; if by reaſon of the variety "of tempers, abilities, educations, and unavoid-"able prejudices, whereby men's underſtandings "are variouſly formed and faſhioned, they do "embrace ſeveral opinions, whereof ſome muſt "be erroneous; to ſay that God will damn them "for ſuch errors, who are lovers of him, and "lovers of truth, is to rob man of his comfort,

"and

" and God of his goodneſs, is to make man deſ-
" perate, and God a tyrant. " *Anſwer to the preface* §. 26.

The Fourth and laſt, and only bad ſort of erroneous perſons, are ſuch as err voluntarily, *i. e.* through careleſſneſs or ſloth, or negligence; and are unwilling to receive the truth when laid before them, and practice according to their errors. Theſe it is certain will meet with their deſerts, and are the objects of God's juſt puniſhments: And the reaſon of it is, in ſuch there is a want of honeſty, or which is worſe, the actual practice of diſhoneſty, inſincerity, and their conſequents. Here is affected ignorance, no deſire of information or amendment: Here is a breach of clear, poſitive laws, and the concurrence of will and choice to render it perfect malice.

The zeal and warmth of ſome will be for loading this fourth article, and for bringing under theſe characters all whom they think fit to damn for ſchiſm or hereſy, or even ſuch whom they ſuſpect of theſe crimes. Enough has been ſaid already, I think, to ſatisfy an intelligent, impartial perſon. But yet I beg leave to ſubjoin, what will add a conſiderable force to what has been already offered to you, *viz.* the conſideration of the obligations all men are under to follow their conſciences, even tho' they are erroneous.

Agreed on all hands it is, that a conſcience directed by the will and word of God, obliges a man to act according to its dictates. Now conſcience being the judgment which every man paſſes upon his actions, as to the goodneſs or illneſs of them, the queſtion is only, how far a man is obliged to act in caſes where he is miſtaken in his judgment? Now to this the anſwer is eaſie; that

a man is obliged always to follow his judgment, tho' it is erroneous. For,

Firſt, conſcience, or our judgment concerning things, is a power or faculty of the mind which God has implanted in us, on purpoſe to be the rule of our actions. When therefore we act in contradiction to that, our actions are voluntary, and contrary to the knowledge we have of God; conſequently we are guilty of voluntary diſobedience, *i. e.* of ſin againſt God.

Secondly, The evil of any action is always meaſured and judged of by God, and all good men, by the intention of the agent. What a man doth neceſſarily, is none of his act; but ſo far as he concurs, conſents, and wills any action, ſo far is he the agent. In an action therefore committed againſt conſcience, the will being ſuppoſed entirely to concur, the agent muſt neceſſarily be diſhoneſt, inſincere, and conſequently guilty of a vice.

Or thus: That is the perpetual rule of all our actions, which if we follow, we are honeſt; if we do not, we are diſhoneſt. Now ſuch is conſcience: We are honeſt if we follow and practiſe vertue, known to us to be vertue; as likewiſe if we hate and avoid vice, known to us to be ſuch. Now our conſcience being our only guide or rule, and it being wickedneſs and hypocriſiy to ſwerve from it, to act againſt conſcience, muſt be wickedneſs. Should a *Jew* pretend to turn Chriſtian, and offer himſelf at the font for baptiſm, and yet not believe Chriſt to be come, nor any thing of Chriſtianity; every one would juſtly deteſt his hypocriſy and vileneſs, which is juſtly imputable

putable to him, for acting contrary to his conſcience.

Thirdly, The ſacred pages juſtify the ſame doctrine, telling us, *Rom.* xiv. 23. *Whatſoever is not of faith is ſin.* St. *Paul* is plainly aſſerting that to be ſin, which does not proceed from a *firm and full perſuaſion of mind* that it is lawful and agreeable to the will of God. Now, whatſoever is contrary to conſcience, is contrary to ſuch a perſuaſion. Nay, St. *Paul* carries this much farther in the former part of the verſe, *He that doubteth is damned if he eat, becauſe he eateth not of faith.* And if he that doubteth is liable to puniſhment, becauſe he doth a thing which he knows not whether it be lawful or not; much more doth he ſin, who acts contrary to faith and full perſuaſion of mind.

Object. You'll ſay, perhaps, notwithſtanding all this and more which may be urged, that a man's conſcience cannot be the rule of his actions, becauſe a rule muſt always be right and ſtrait; but conſcience very often ſwerves from ſtraitneſs by means of errors: therefore ſome other rule, even the rule of conſcience it ſelf, *viz.* the word of God, ſhould be our guide.

Anſw. The word of God is the rule of conſcience, ſo far only as it is known and underſtood; and all men, no queſtion, who know it to be the word of God, are ready to ſubmit their judgments to it. But then he who lies under an erroneous conſcience, doth not know the will of God; for if he knows it, how is he erroneous? If he doth not know it, it is impoſſible for that to be his guide or rule.

You'll

You'll ſay, a man ought, in ſuch circumſtances, to ſuſpend his actions. That is, a man ought to ſuſpend his actions when his conſcience tells him that it is his duty to do them; which is but little different from a contradiction.

But what muſt a man do in ſuch unhappy circumſtances, when the laws of God are contrary to one's conſcience?

The anſwer is obvious; he muſt follow his conſcience, let the conſequence be what it will. Should he break the laws of God, not known or underſtood, by following his erroneous conſcience, he would as certainly be free from guilt before God; as, were he literally to keep the laws of God, but yet act againſt his conſcience, he would be guilty of a flagrant crime. This perhaps may ſeem a paradox; but yet if there be a rule in any caſe of diſtinguiſhing between what is a ſin and what is not one, it is eaſy to do ſo by the ſame rule in the preſent caſe. As,

Firſt, That is a crime which is committed with a baſe, vile, and diſhoneſt mind and intention: but he that acts with an erring conſcience againſt the unknown or not underſtood will of God, acts with a ſincere and honeſt mind; therefore to follow one's conſcience in ſuch caſes, even againſt the will of God, is not a crime. 2dly, The moral evil of any action is not to be judged of from the bare fact itſelf, but from the circumſtances attending it. Every killing of a man is not murder; nor is every falſhood a lye; nor is every ſort of taking away another man's goods theft and robbery. If killing a man, conſidered only as to the fact, were *malum in ſe*, then it would have been abſolutely impoſſible that in any circumſtances one might have taken away the life of another; or

that

that God ſhould ever have commanded *Abraham* to ſlay his ſon *Iſaac*; becauſe God would have commanded the performance of an act abſolutely inconſiſtent with goodneſs; which would be a contradiction. We find, that God himſelf excuſed even the killing of a man, if it were done through ignorance: *But the ſoul that doth ought preſumptuouſly, the ſame reproacheth the Lord, and that ſoul ſhall be cut off from amongſt his people*, Numb. xv. 30. It is then murder, when knowingly and deſignedly, againſt law, we take away the life of a man: It is theft when we deſign the depriving another of what is his own, and illegally execute our deſigns; and ſo of other ſins. Facts therefore done through mere involuntary error and unaffected ignorance, being always look'd upon as free from crime, and ſuch as are done with deſign being look'd upon as criminal: it is evident that conſcience is to be followed; and he is always guilty of the leaſt crimes, who recedes the leaſt from that.

Will an erroneous conſcience therefore excuſe all faults? Or will he that follows that, be free from the imputation of ſin? Will error, like charity, *cover the multitude of ſins?* Or in what conſiſts the crime of erroneous perſons?

The crime conſiſts in what I have more than once obſerved, in the negligence of ſuch as are betrayed into error. Which negligence is more or leſs puniſhable, as the will of God has been plainer or more diſcoverable by men. Puniſhable, I ſay, but not by man, unleſs the errors betray them into ſuch acts as are inconſiſtent with the civil intereſts of mankind. For ſince the fault lies only in negligence, what man alive can tell what induſtry, pains or labour has been uſed to attain the truth? God, the ſearcher of hearts, can eaſily diſcover this; and therefore we are aſſured,

Rom. i. 20. that the Gentiles are without excuſe, for their follies and ſins in idolatry, *becauſe that which may be known of God is manifeſt in, or to, them, ---for the inviſible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly ſeen, being underſtood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead: ſo that they are without excuſe.*

But then if the fault of negligence be removed, if diligence and induſtry be applied, and yet the error be unſurmountable, it is plain the error is involuntary, it is neceſſary, becauſe out of our power to remove it; and therefore the perſons under ſuch miſtake are as free from crime, or the imputation of it, and as innocent, as any orthodox perſons are; and I ſee not how God could either be good or juſt, if he laid it to their charge. Whereever there is crime there muſt be concurrence of will. He that follows an erroneous Conſcience, may be guilty of ſin, if his error be voluntary: but if he can be charged with neither negligence nor affected ignorance, nor any wilfulneſs, he cannot have any crime.

It is time now to look back, and to view the ground we have gone over. It is evident, I believe, that no involuntary errors are puniſhable. Therefore, 2dly, That thoſe perſons whoſe errors are involuntary in purely ſpeculative matters are not puniſhable. Nor, 3dly, Such, whoſe involuntary errors have only accidental connexions with practice. Nor, 4thly, Such, whoſe involuntary errors have a neceſſary connexion, ſo long as the connexion is not ſeen by them. The only puniſhable errors are ſuch as are voluntary, and proceed from negligence; and in this caſe too, to ſpeak properly, it is the negligence, and not the error which is puniſhable. Laſtly, it has been prov'd, that an erroneous Conſcience obliges us

to

to follow its dictates, and that it is no crime to break the laws of God through unaffected ignorance, and always one to act againſt one's Conſcience.

Let me now a little touch thoſe theological ſcare-crows, as they are commonly uſed, and as Mr. *Hales*, in his tract *of Schiſm*, calls them, hereſy and ſchiſm. From what has been ſaid, it follows, that that hereſy cannot be damnable, which conſiſts in the belief of any falſe notion embraced after ſearch and careful enquiry, be it what it will, whether it be in a ſpeculative matter, or in ſuch points as have either accidental or neceſſary connexion with practice: and the reaſon is in all theſe caſes, error is involuntary, and therefore is not puniſhable. It cannot be criminal, unleſs it proceeds from wilful negligence in ſearching after the will of God, and enquiring into his laws. For if a great deal of pains and care has been uſed to know the mind of God, and yet we cannot attain it, it is not our fault, and conſequently we cannot be chargeable. " For if God, (ſays " Mr. *Chillingworth*) would have had his meaning in theſe places certainly known, how could " it ſtand with his wiſdom to be ſo wanting to his " own will and end as to ſpeak obſcurely? Or. " how can it conſiſt with his juſtice, to require of " men to know certainly the meaning of thoſe " words, which he himſelf hath not revealed? " Suppoſe there were an abſolute monarch, that " in his own abſence from one of his kingdoms, " had written laws for the government of it, " ſome very plainly, and ſome very ambiguouſly and obſcurely, and his ſubjects ſhould " keep thoſe that were plainly written with all " exactneſs; and for thoſe that were obſcure, uſe " their beſt diligence to find his meaning in them,

" and obey them according to the ſenſe of them " which they conceive; ſhould this king either " with juſtice or wiſdom be offended with theſe " ſubjects, if by reaſon of the obſcurity of them, " they miſtook the ſenſe of them, and fail of " performance, by reaſon of their error? Cap. 2. §. 127.

To make therefore hereſy puniſhable, it muſt firſt be proved criminal; and to do that, it muſt be proved voluntary, or to proceed from negligence. And then the definition of it muſt be, not (as it is uſually put) for an error in fundamentals, but ſomething elſe. However, when once men are agreed upon what are fundamentals, and lay aſide human deductions, as certainly non-fundamentals; ſure it is, that a great many notions, to ſerve a party frequently called hereſies, will be blotted out of the catalogue. A heretick, that is puniſhable, is one that maintains doctrines contrary to the doctrines of Chriſt, through pride, or vain-glory, or any ſiniſter end; ſo that the fault of an heretick lies in the irregularity of his will, not in his underſtanding. God may puniſh ſuch, conſiſtent with goodneſs, juſtice and mercy; and in ſuch caſes every man ſhould follow the Apoſtle's rule concerning hereticks, Tit. iii. 10, 11. *A man that is an heretick, after the firſt and ſecond admonition, reject; knowing that he that is ſuch is ſubverted and ſinneth, being condemned of himſelf.* For ſurely ſuch an heretick as is before-mentioned, who will preſume to teach doctrines from ſuch carnal ends, has all the characters which the Apoſtle gives; he is ſubverted, he ſins, he is ſelf-condemned: but as for that which generally bears the name of hereſy, *viz.* an error in ſome ſpeculations about the Trinity, or other myſteries of chriſtianity, a man who has carefully

carefully ſtudied, and is only miſtaken in theſe matters, will hardly be found to have above one of the three characters the Apoſtle gives of an heretick. If he be ſubverted, yet it will be hard to prove ſin, or ſelf-condemnation, upon him. In ſhort, hereſy is not an error of the underſtanding, but of the will. If errors of the underſtanding are criminal, let all be ſo, and puniſh philoſophical ones as well as theological, and take into the account all others too, and *let him that is without ſin among you caſt the firſt ſtone.* If this ſeems ſhocking, give but a good reaſon why theological errors of the underſtanding muſt be ſinful and liable to puniſhments, and I'll venture to promiſe to prove others to be under the ſame predicament. If you allow me that hereſy is an error of the will, then tell me why the man that impartially ſtudies the ſcriptures, and differs in his notions from the received hypotheſes in ſome myſterious ſpeculative matters, is branded with the ignominious character of heretick? It is ſurprizing therefore, that a profeſſed opinion, accompanied with charity and good nature, ſhould become more criminal in ſome mens minds, than even a wicked life. If it were in my choice to appear before the great ſearcher of hearts in what manner I would, I would rather appear with a thouſand errors, and what ſome call hereſies, about me, if they were ſuch as proceeded from real judgment, after all my induſtry to ſearch out truth, and to know the will of God, than to appear as one who has been ever drunk, or unjuſt, or profane, without one ſpeculative error in his head. And yet how lightly are theſe paſſed over, and how terribly is an erroneous Perſon, or perhaps one no more than ſuſpected of error, hamper'd, perſecuted, and worried? "Anciently, (ſays Mr.

" Mr. *Hales*, in his Sermon upon *Rom.* xiv. 1.) " heretical and orthodox Chriſtians, many times " even in publick holy exerciſe, converſed toge- " ther without offence. It is noted in the eccle- " ſiaſtick ſtories, that the *Arians* and right be- " lievers ſo communicated together in holy prayers, " that you could not diſtinguiſh them till they " came to the Δοξολογία, the *Gloria Patri*, which " the *Arians* uſed with ſome difference from other " Chriſtians. But thoſe were times, *quorum lecti-* " *onem habemus, virtutem non habemus: We read* " *of them in our books, but we have loſt the prac-* " *tice of their patience.*" ----- And preſently afterwards, " SEVERITY againſt, and SEPA- " RATION from heretical companies, took " its beginning from the hereticks themſelves". This latter is plainly a miſtake in this great man. For ſeverity on religious accounts plainly took its beginning from the *Orthodox*. But if you will ſay, what I will not at preſent examine or refute, that the fact was otherwiſe, I ſhall ask, whence then is it that orthodox perſons are ſo ready to follow the evil example of hereticks, and what is more, the very worſt part of their example? Whence is it that they ſo readily embrace the means which were invented by erroneous perſons to carry on a wrong cauſe? Do but conſult experience, and that will tell you, that ſince the time when force and temporal puniſhments were firſt uſed to propagate notions, it has been ten times, I might ſay ten thouſand times, uſed to propagate errors, inſtead of once to propagate truth.

As to *Schiſm*, I ſhall only add, that from what has been ſaid, nothing can be inferr'd that will encourage that; and I cannot but refer you to Mr. *Hales*'s

Hales's tract upon that ſubject, which you cannot read without both pleaſure and advantage.

If, Sir, you ſhould think fit to make a publick reply to what is here offer'd, I know you are too much a Gentleman to catch at words, and let go my meaning. I perſuade my ſelf that you will believe me, when I aſſure you, that I love truth for its own ſake, and am overjoy'd when I find it, though it makes againſt me. I only allot to truth the firſt place in my heart: Next to that, you have the preeminence in,

SIR,

Your moſt Obedient Servant.

ERRATA.

PAGE 9. Line 30. for *Proteſtants* read *Proteſtant*. P. 26. l. 12. for *errors* r. *error*. P. 29. l. 6. for *and* r. *or*.

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